



Rabble Rouse



The World Editions

Her Life On Paper

Poems of Survival

**Selected Poems of
Patricia Mees Armstrong**

Pat Armstrong's poetry, so richly woven in, takes us by the hand and, as if we were blind, says: *Here, feel*. Her legacy as a poet—and more importantly, as a person—is destined to be words that, in some ways, helped us see for the first time. Is there a higher honor for a poet?"

-Bob Welch, Author, Columnist, The Register-Guard

About the Author

Patricia Mees Armstrong was an award winning writer who published six collections of poetry in her lifetime. She used her craft to raise funds and awareness for the breast cancer she suffered from. She was a New Jersey native and world traveler who spent extensive periods in Ireland, Guam and Greece.

This collection was compiled and published posthumously by her grandchildren.

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Her Life on Paper

Author's Self portrait



Poems of Survival



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Rabble Rouse The World Press
RabbleRouseTheWorld.com
Rabble@RabbleRouseTheWorld.com
@RRTW

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Set in Palatino

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Patricia and Richard Armstrong

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FORWARD

Our grandfather, Richard Chester Armstrong, is the most persistent man we know. He is the reason you are holding this book in your hand.

At the time of our writing this, he is a week away from his 85th birthday. He may have lost the use of his legs and his memory may be as intact as the Sphinx's nose, but his charisma and indomitable energy still shines through. That's pretty good, since forty years ago he was given six months to live.

He has lived a much more interesting life than he would have ever imagined. After he returned from the Korean War with a purple heart, he thought his traveling days were over. He was ready to settle down, build a white picket fence, marry, and start a family.

Little did he know, as he dove for my grandmother's shoe at a "Shoe Dance" at Berkeley, that the woman who he danced with, would take the lead, and in 50 years of marriage he would live in 53 different houses all over the world.

Our grandmother had a restless heart and my grandfather's love for her led him to follow her wherever her whims took them. Six years after her death, our grandmother's overriding passion--her poetry--is still my grandfather's

passion. His ambition in life was inseparable for hers. As all of her books have gone out of print, our grandpa has been plotting a way to republish her work. This book grants that wish

We are under no illusions that posthumous poetry, published six years after a relatively obscure author's death is as likely to be bought as swampland occupied by the Taliban. However, we love our grandpa, loved our grandma, and believe that the artistic importance in her work transcends our own appreciation of it.

We hope, however, that through this book which has found its way into your hands, that our grandmother's soul will shine in all its poetic beauty.

As my grandpa puts it, if this book can help "fight against the disease that killed my wife," and beats the odds to become profitable, 20% of those profits will be donated to support cancer research.

-Luke and Mary Maguire Armstrong

REMEMBERING GRANDMA IN CUBA

by Luke Maguire Armstrong

More essays at TravelWriteSing.com

It is not always easy to know where a story starts. In my Grandma's case, it seems appropriate to start at the end, in Cuba, where I traveled after she had already left this world. Were it not for her, I don't know that I ever would have arrived in Havana's José Martí International Airport in the first place.

*

"So why are you going to Cuba, mate?" an Australian seated next to me asks casually as our flight descends. My thoughts scuttle, rushing to form a cohesive answer for him, for me.

His question catches me off guard and I stumble over my words and tell him that I am not sure why I am here. As he turns back to his in-flight magazine, I look out the airplane porthole at the green Caribbean below. Cuba blooms distantly on the horizon.

“Why have you come to Cuba?” I am asked again as I make my way through immigration. The answer to this question seems to be of critical importance to the Cuban airport official who takes me away from the other passengers to a private interrogation room to question my motivations for the visit. He is clearly not impressed with me as he dumps the contents of my backpack onto a metal, prison-ish table in front of me.

The room looks like a set for a CSI episode, and I’m enthralled until I remember I’m not in Kansas anymore and that worry might be a better choice of emotion.

“Tourism!” I muster, when he asks me again, “I’m here for tourism.”

“Where are you staying?” He shoots back. It dawns on me that if I play my hand wrong my dream of Cuba and my plan will need to be modified to a dream of visiting Havana’s José Martí International Airport. I take out my guidebook and point randomly to a hotel listing in Havana. He accepts this with a grunt and writes down the address.

Then he meticulously picks through the contents of my pack. “Why do you have fifteen copies of the same book?” He wields a handful of my grandmother’s poetry books in the air like they are drugs.

“*No sé,*” I tell him weakly. I don’t know. This is the wrong answer, but the truth is so complicated. I search for any plausible reason. Finally, I marshal an unconvincing one: “I, umm, they are gifts I bought in Mexico to bring to

Guatemala, where I live." He is skeptical and begins flipping through one of the thin tomes, making a careful study of its contents. I hope he has nothing against free verse.

Not finding anything incriminating in the book, he moves on to other suspicious items. "Why do you have this flashlight?"

"To see in the dark."

He grabs my notebook, scans and stops on one page as if he's finally found something he could use to lock me away forever. "Where did you get this information?" He flings me the notebook and points to the page. Scribbled is an incomplete timeline of significant historical dates. Bay of Pigs Invasion, 1961. Cuban Missile Crisis, 1963. Che Guevara is killed by CIA in Bolivia, 1967. Etc. . .

I tell him it is from the Internet.

"Who's Internet?" He puffs up his chest in a way that implies that physical violence is inevitable.

"The world's Internet. . ."

"You know there are other perspectives out there other than yours!"

"Yes." I tell him, unaware of any disagreement about what year the Bay Of Pigs Invasion took place, but opt to keep this to myself.

He sets the notebook down snootily and snatches my passport, leaving me alone in the room. I had read somewhere that under no circumstances does any official ever have the right to separate you from your passport, and that if any attempt is ever made you must demand the contrary. I consider making him aware of this, but the

slamming door he left in his wake convinces me that my best bet is sitting quietly and acting as agreeable as possible.

After five minutes of imagining what a Cuban prison is like, he returns smiling and hands me my passport. "Sorry for the bother, have a great stay in Cuba. We welcome you!"

*

Patricia Mees Armstrong was first introduced to me as my Grandma: an older woman carrying a strong aroma of perfume who, unlike my Mom, seemed to understand the importance of large amounts of candy in my life. But like a boy who looks at a girl, and for the first time actually sees her, sees her as a member of the opposite sex and begins to vaguely grasp the full significance of that, I began to slowly see my Grandma as the person she was. The lady signing the checks in my birthday cards was once described by a friend as "one of the most passionately unique people on the planet."

For most of her life, my Grandma worked as a teacher. Her influence on her students lasted far beyond the classroom. In 1967, she had her sixth grade students sign a pact. They all agreed that on Jan. 1, 2000, they would hold a reunion in front of the Eugene hotel in Eugene, Oregon. Thirty-three years later, her students resurfaced from across the country and met my Grandma there to fulfill the pact signed in their youth.

Bob Welsh, a writer for the local newspaper wrote about the reunion and afterwards became a close friend of my Grandma. "I've never known anyone like her," he wrote. "So

full of life, so dogged by death. She could, in a single e-mail, lift my spirits with praise for something I'd written and pound them into the ground with details about her failing health."

My Grandma was also a poet and writer; a daughter who still carried a grudge against her cruel mother, and a woman who tried to be the best mother she could to my dad and his two brothers—the pride of her life. She was a friend of many (whether they wanted that friendship or not), and too often, just someone frustrated by her failing body.

She was an interesting woman, but not an easy woman. Those close to her often complained about her narcissism and self-centeredness. Even she realized she was not always an easy person to love. "I've been told I'm a high-maintenance relationship," she once said. "I ain't everybody's cuppa, ya know. Lot's of people find me a huge pain in the shyster."

And it was true. On a bad day, my Grandma was a narcissistic, envelope pushing, mind-game-playing, ornery woman to be contended with. She was not a woman you wanted to misuse a semi-colon around because she'd let you know if you did.

My grandma drove a tough bargain with life, but she had her reasons. Life had dealt her a few emotionally damaging hands early on, and all things considered, she had managed to come out okay. She managed to be a good mother to my dad and his brothers. She was miles away from being pleasant, but beneath her hard exterior was a woman filled with love, longing, and lyrics.

On my thirteenth birthday my grandma gave me a copy of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. Accustomed to Disney endings, I thought it would have been better if Santiago's fish had not been lost to sharks. But sharks aside, the book affected me in a wild way. It sparked my passion for literature and Cuba—two fires still burning today. When I thanked my Grandma over the phone for the book, we ended up having an hour-long conversation about the political realities in Cuba. I remember blushing with pride when I hung up the phone. I was just then taking my first steps into adulthood and it was riveting to hear my Grandma speak to me as she would a peer.

*

My Grandma's relationship with her daughters-in-law was always strained. She was territorial and could not bear sharing her sons' affections with others. Having been left to feel unloved by her own parents, she saw her son's wives as competition for their affections—and she needed their love too much to share it without some resentment. But despite the tense entanglements that defined the relationship with her daughters-in-law, after she passed, what lingered in their memories were the beautiful parts of my Grandma. My aunt Eleanor reflected in an email to my uncle:

She was always THERE. You could rely on her to be there and to care, really care, about what was going on with you. Her opinions may have been too strong, all that is a

given, but how great it is to have someone in your life like that.

Her sense of curiosity was unique. She seemed constantly interested in her world, the people in her world, new places, new things, (even technology). She loved to learn. Her intellectual hunger was one of my favorite things about her. She asked people a lot of questions, she was eager to KNOW. Her grasp of details, facts, information about your shared lives was amazing. She was so damned smart.

She really loved the people she loved and she loved them hard. She expected a lot out of them, and she loved them like hell. You will always have her love with you, even though she's gone. She's still here in that way, believe me. Her tender side was just lovely.

Her tender side still lives on today, because that's the part I find in her poetry. The verses she penned contrasted her sometimes-hard outer shell and showed a woman who desperately needed to love and be loved. Many of the poems deal with death. She lived for over a decade with doctors never giving her more than six months to live.

I learned from my Grandparents relationship what love really looks like and why it's so worth searching for and holding onto. When cancer took my Grandma's left breast and hair and diabetes caused her to gain weight, my Grandpa still believed her to be the most beautiful woman in the world and told her so every day.

She was brave the way she held onto life and tried not to let her debilitating diseases limit her. She saw herself as a free spirit, bravely traveling the world with her doting husband. She saw herself walking beaches in Greece, watching the sunset across a burning horizon. She saw herself swimming in the Caribbean. She saw herself drinking beers with colorful locals in dimly lit Irish taverns. But for the last decade of her life, her cancers held her captive and prevented her from doing any of these things. This is why so many of her poems speak of loss.

In a poem from her book "A Life On Paper: Poems of Survival," she speaks directly to her cancer asking, "Who invited you back, invader?" and ends by telling her cancer that it has no immunity against "an unwilling body."

*

By the time I arrive in Havana, my delay at the airport has taken most of the daylight with it. In just a few minutes the sun will escape behind the city's 17th-century architecture. The blazing sky and picturesque backdrop are stunning. I want to pause forever to absorb the moment in such a way that it can become a part of me. I sit down and read my grandmother's poems beside the sea and listen to the splashing of kids jumping into the water from the rocks.

I rent a room from a friendly Cuban named Frank and he too asks the recurring question, "Why have you come to Cuba?" I tell him for tourism, because I still feel unable to articulate even to myself, much less others, what my

Grandma meant to me and how she has led me to this island.

*

Most of my life my Grandma and I lived states or countries apart, but would keep in touch through email. Connected through a modem, we would conspire about our hopes and dreams. Neither her age nor her failing health ever stopped her from dreaming and reaching.

Sometimes, we would talk about Cuba and Hemingway. She told me about how she too had always wanted to go there and walk the Hemingway haunts of Havana. Even after she was far too sick for it to be a reality, we sometimes would plan a trip to Cuba over the phone, both pretending to believe in the possibility of it. Once, when reality trumped our fantasies, she wrote me to say, I fear my traveling days are now limited to the Starbucks on the corner, Luke. But if you ever make it to Cuba, and I imagine you will, promise me you'll have a rum and coke for me. I told her I would have several.

Though throughout our relationship she had sent me scores of her poems to read, self-consciousness had always prevented me from sharing my poetry with others. I only ever sent her a single poem. I sent it to her four months before she died. Sensing that she did not have much time left, I knew it was time to overcome my apprehension and I emailed her a poem that she had inspired.

Hi Grandma,

I hope you are enjoying your Sunday. I just returned from a hike into the hills surrounding Antigua. It was fabulous. I did not see a single person the whole time. I hiked up high enough to touch the clouds, only to find that once I reached them, all they did was turn into a lovely mist to cool the sweat from the hike. On the top of a mountain, my thoughts went to you and I wrote you a poem called "Seaside Grace." I hope I touched upon some of the ageless beauty that you encapsulate. Thanks for being in my life and I hope you enjoy the poem.

*Love,
Luke*

A few weeks later my grandmother's uncharacteristically late reply came:

My, I had to take some time to acknowledge your latest paeon. I blush, of course, and also am touched by your imagery, cadence, analogies - there is raw talent in your written words, an innocence blended with worldliness...I encourage more poetry, concrete as well as abstract. You have the subject matter of every exotic place you are traveling.

I am doing poorly - not sleeping well, in discomfort. But grabbing as many waking hours as I can to cuddle the mister and greet friends in my private quarters (I am still adhering to Emily Dickinson's "The soul reflects her own society/then

shuts the door/on her divine majority/obtrude no more.”)

I am not unfriendly, but I need to pick my own time and protect my own space. Catch us up. I assume you got your birthday funds...the check cleared here.

Love to your siblings and folks...Grandma A

The last email I sent my Grandma was to confirm my plans to visit her. She was going downhill quickly, and I knew that this trip might be the last time I'd ever see her. Her reply was uncharacteristically brief:

I am very ill as you know and facing among other problems, a spinal tap later this week to determine the extent of cancer cells in my right temporal lobe - however thanks for your call and info online. I will do what I can and am excited about your plans.

*Much love,
Grandma A*

I never got to say that goodbye. In the book my Grandma gave me on my thirteenth birthday, Hemingway asks, “Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel?”

I boarded the right plane, but before it arrived my grandmother departed for a sea vaster than Hemingway's. My plane landed in time for her funeral. I would miss her

and was reminded just how fleeting everything always is. Though there was no one to receive it, I sent a final email to my grandmother:

You won't get this email. But I love you. Thank you for The Old Man and the Sea, and thank you for your life and your love. I love you so much and you will be so missed.

*

Every morning, when he convinces his tired eyes to open, my Grandpa reads a letter my Grandma left him. It is a weathered piece of paper that feels soft, like cloth; from the many mornings he has taken it from its tattered envelope. Often when people visit him, he gives it to them to read. He wants the world to understand just how special the love between he and his wife was.

Dear Rich,

We have had so much more time than I ever thought – we have overcome the odds over and over again, and I have tried to understand why God has given us all this time. We have had adventures, seen our family grow and grow, and had many bumps in the road. We have been foolish with money, yet somehow still taken care of despite our ineptness, and each of us has touched others – and, I think, we both wonder how it can be we struggle some times to reach each other, to understand our differences through the lens of loving each other to distraction.

Despite all my nagging and criticisms, in spite of all the faultfinding I have done, deep down know that it is I who am flawed – I am the culprit. You are a sweet, loving, vulnerable man who thinks he has an exceptional wife – well, I am really just an ordinary person with more than my share of warts, more than my share of insecurities – all wrapped up in this big faking front that fools a lot of people most of the time. By comparison, you are perfection.

I cannot imagine a life lived without you. But when I am gone and you are reading this, do know that I want the rest of your life to be full and interesting. Miss me, of course, but still remember to laugh and to do what you enjoy – play golf every single waking minute if that is what you want to do – talk to me – I may not respond but I promise to listen and not to interrupt now! You will have the floor until we are together again. And it will be a lovely floor because my sweet, darling husband is standing on it.

I adore you, sweetheart. You made my life full of challenge, fun, adventure, passion and trust.

Please, please be wise about yourself.

-Pat

Part of what made my Grandma defy the doctor's diagnosis and hang onto life longer than anyone expected she would, was her stubborn desire to finish her novel "The

Fattest Woman in Ireland.” And she did finish it. And though some publishers took interest in it, she passed on before she found one to pick it up.

After her death my Grandpa fulfilled her dream of having her book in print and had a press print a modest 500 copies. When I visited him a year after my Grandma’s death, he took copies of the book everywhere he went. Wherever his wheel chair took him he would start up conversations with strangers, “This is a great book that my wife wrote. You need to read it. It’s hilarious. Twenty bucks!”

My Grandpa would then force a copy into their hands and wait to be paid. My Grandma would have been so proud to see that. But I could also see in my Grandpa’s eyes how hard it was for him to be without her. I could see that he needed to take those books with them. He needed people to buy them not for the money. He needed that distraction. He felt that through the book, he was doing what he had always done—worked so hard to see his wife’s dreams fulfilled. Those books kept her alive to him. Or at least, they gave him a distraction from the harrowing realization that she was gone.

*

I am walking through Havana while children run about kicking soccer balls and old men sit smoking cigars in plastic chairs. Women are laughing and lovers conspiring. Cars from a bygone era cough noisily down the street. As is typical of the Caribbean, life here seems bright and easy. My

backpack is heavy under the hot sun, but it will soon be lightened.

I pass by the historical sights drawing in tourists in search of bookshops. I've set out today to do what amounts to the opposite of shoplifting. My backpack is filled with copies of my Grandma's book, *A Life on Paper: Poems of Survival*. The first bookshop I find is a small room filled with the smells of the dilapidated books strewn about the shelves.

The storeowner greets me warmly. I get the impression his modest store does not get much traffic. He's surrounded by weathered books that look like they have arrived here from a bygone era. I wait for him to glance away and then, I slip one of my grandmother's onto the shelf. I've written inside each: To Cuba with love, From Patricia Mees Armstrong via her loving grandson. Thanks for giving me the gift of Cuba.

This is the only goodbye I know how to say to her, but it hardly feels like a farewell. No one is here with me, but I do not feel alone. I feel a secret joy when I imagine what will become of each paperback as it floats freely around the island. Her poetry, the most palpable part of her, has made the journey to Cuba.

When I slip the last book onto the shelf of another run down bookstore, I walk out to Havana's harbor and look out at the blindingly blue waters of the Caribbean. I close my eyes and imagine my Grandma as I never knew her. I imagine her as the young woman who took her family across the globe—the woman who fell madly in love with my Grandpa, who loved her so much that he followed her

wherever her whims took them. I imagine her on a beach in Greece, arm and arm with my Grandpa, conspiring about their future. I imagine that she has found peace somewhere and can feel some part of her here with me today.

Hemingway once said, "There isn't any symbolism. The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks, no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit." But I think Hemingway was wrong about that. Because here in Cuba, I see symbolism in everything. I hear her music in the Caribbean's waves and smell her perfume in the salted breezes. I feel her warmth in the sand, and feel her heartbeat in my own. It's never easy to say goodbye to someone you love. But today, my Grandma seems as alive as ever. She left too much of herself with me for me to ever feel that I've lost her completely.

Finding and Eating Poetry

I've been finding poems
all over town... just this morning
one started at me, blurred by rain
soaked on the early paper
propped against the cat's dish
on the front steps. Another
was hanging ripe
 from a neighbor's gable.

I ate it up like a sweet pear.
Before its juices dried on my chin,
I spotted another trying to rhyme
on a maple seedling along the
driveway. This child needed
watering, some plumping & fattening out...
it might even mature while
I am out looking for still more poems
all over town.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

A Song of Irish Pens and Brushes

In Erin's old poverty, pens came cheaper than brushes,
ink was less dear than oils,
and music was torn from the woods
and the fens, carving dark, low branches
into fipple flutes, and drums from goatskins torn
from flesh before it charred on the spit,
to feed the starving.

'Tis still so that Ireland's writers surpass her artists,
'through maven cry there's pain enough
to birth great statue and canvas.

And yet the music-makers thrive on airs of unknown
composers while poets and scribes tell
of past, breathing old miracles, drinking
tart salts from the maddening sea, while great Irish
art works hang unformed, unnamed
in galleries of mists with invisible walls.

Her House

You *shall* have your house, he said,
and face the sea and dig your toes
in burlap sand, and mine brittle coins
the fists of foam have hurled unspent

and scarred up on the beach. You
shall find your claim, he said, in trunks
of salt, dowried chests of stinging spray,
and wear old laces high above

your seasoned feet on mornings
when the wind sleeps late and seagulls
line for runway clearance. You shall have
your cliffs, he said, and scan the storms

and walk on shards of distilled
air, carry amulets of kelp
roped to charm an anxious undertow.
And you shall have my soul for sail,

he said, on waves that throw slack
teaser fish at weathered planks from
displaced decks freighted down with lonely

men who sought your loving face

and arms in quaints of hiding
towns, surnamed on city limit
signs for wanderers your seawall kiss
denied and sweet shining welcomes

your grew mourning eyes forgot.
Above the sobs of silent sand,
in earsound of a last whistler whale
aye, you *shall* have your house, he said.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

That One Time With Robert Frost

Rutgers—1952

Me, third row center, college chapel,
his reading gig... I'd not reckoned
on stone floor clanks resounding
when I dropped a metal knitting needle
'midst the bard's ironic rendering:
"the only other sound's the sweep
of easy wind..."

 he stopped mid-meter, glared
smack straight at my guilt, the lectern
cutting him in visual half.

And out I ran, clutching unraveling yarn,
out, out through swinging doors,
sobbing mortified tears, doubled over
 vomit disgracing my shoes
as a nodding janitor offered me rags.

Long since

 I've walked Frost's road not taken
and watched countless woods of life
fill up with snow,
but I never knitted in public again,
and plastic needles are all I own.

On the Road to Laragh

Half fair along, the black road to Laragh
knows its narrows by heart, enough
to risk darting peeks down gentle banks
at the wee church in Clara Vale, long
a healthy grace for common days
of dampish gray, with kisses of whitewash
and grasses ever green hugging
Avoca's smallest sister stream
running a cappella for farewells
in the wider sea past Arklow town.

Rattles of old pagan bones, buried
in the high hind of sloping woods
scoff and snort at the cobbled bridge
bearing devout parades for certain solace
in the simple nave and apse and alter.

And, in the wake of pavement commerce
wing and wind the notes of young ghosts
long-time storers of a children's chorus
in the barren rafters of the closed
and lonely parish school while every fare,
every drive on the high road refreshes
in the ageless breath of Clara Vale, certain
they have just seen Paradise.

Mona Equinox

1

In the dark I left our bed
& walked near bogs alone
to mourn a hyphenated time
soon to wear wet wools of winter.

2

I pulled on leggings of paper leaves
& warmed in pleasing yellow smoke
from softly rotting homeless apples

3

& drank the steam of amber ale,
the sweating of prophetic rain.
I munched clichés of menstrual months

4

& stretched skin white-tight around me.
Still thirsty after simple acts of weeping,
I stumbled blind on restive paths,

5

spilled antimatter from adobe mugs,
crying, frantic for summer's faces,
impotent to keep a last night's life intact
without you.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Never be the Same

(for David Horgan)

The years piled up like grey stones
to build a cairn for us to climb
and look across the greening seas
to where our Irish friend pointed.
“Go,” he said. “Go touch the ground
of my past, sweet, dear places where
seeds of my soul still grow. You will
know Ireland by its call, and you will
press yourself into its mood and graces,
and you will warm in its chilling winds,
and sob at its music, and then smile
in its people’s embrace.” And, he said,
“You will know why God sent you, and
what it is you still have to learn.” He
smiled. “And you will never be
same for the learning.”

the mottled pasts annoy, mewling
beasts tamp in sultana rot
near Malevisi; *kri-kris* swoop Greco
in Fodele, fish brag the tides by Nikolaos.

Each black grape mouths a tart
matinada, mixes its wine with improbable
greens, communes in mountains that murder
the sky.

Siroccos rest in the heat, southern
white suns sweeten the bones of my orange.
This slash of land, a strange honest felon:
my money is safe, my breasts untouched
while singing Greeks pick the locks to my soul.

Pirate

When school let out in humid June,
we linked the old place on our chains
of residence, moved to town's edge,
nailed up stuff on uneven walls
close to grassy fields & musical woods.

She brought welcoming jars of dill-
salted pickles, & she issued pirate warnings
all summer long' deer & birds
were such rogues, she said, shameless
gourmands of summer's fat fruits.

Previous owners or renters like us
(she amended quickly), found little
effective, short of shooting. Turn out
our apple counts were down early,
thanks to sticky black brews

Pa painted to resist the blight
on the old tree's spring-shorn branches.
But, oh, the blueberries, netted safe
at birth, nursed with sunny water! We
whispered secrets to our virgin tongues

swollen hot in wait for harvest,
we promised clean, empty shelves
shares of treasure in dark, hungry
winter. Day before picking we went
on a rare overnight to the coast.

She waved goodbye with large, floured
hand, the same opened her door next day
when Ma needed some sugar. the deer
were here in droves, she said, & turned
to fetch from her store of staples.

Through the haze of harsh screen door, I
watched her return to her kitchen, her
blue footprints staining the carpet. I
inhaled vapors of sweet cooling jam
& cried at the thought of our winter's bare bread.

A Review of Paco's Résumé

Journeyman beggar, entrepreneur, twenty-two years at the same spot. Steady worker. Regulars, referrals & tourists his clientele. Applicant counts heartbeats & footsteps thirty feet out on hot cobblestone. Knows the guilty & pious by the clinks and thuds of deflated coins & welcome windfalls of greased paper bills. He makes cheerful change,

no perceptible difference in his usual blessing; smiles wide under sightless eyes he earned outrunning the bulls to impress María. Punctual as Sanctus bells; has tools: a shiny cup protruding from his hand like a bone, a black cane alert in his spare brown fist. Neat. He slicks back his hair like thin, wet tar & takes care not to wipe

on his undyed serape, a joint gift from valley lambs & old nuns going blind at looms in the *convento*. His wall near the plaza will soon fall to urban renewal, forcing Paco's job relocation. He will consider other options. *Los mendigos no pueden escoger*. Beggars can't be choosers.

For office only: Contact Paco under the bridge when it's dry; or leave messages at José's Cantina. *Por favor, file under "B"*.

Model for a Painting Class

In a sky-windowed room I sit
under cloud cover of canvas
in light in shadow by painters
too shy to call themselves artists
yet I am cloned imperfectly
in the quickened truth of charcoal
of glazed pastels passionate oils
they are pained creative moment
I am thoughtful statued stillness

Look for these eyes they paint to smile
in approbation as I plumb
their brushed mirrors for images
of myself I am also new
enough in this role to feel lost
in the title model

Living With What's Left

Some days I don't remember the breast at all,
the one they took for medical stew; the feel
of it is gone, the curving softness, the lift
when toweled or bra'd, damp velvets
of its underline, the tingle when it first
allowed a lover's kiss, & massages
to the point of pain in sweet, ecstatic love.

I should have captured it on film, but
I never planned its loss, to have it gone
with scars to mark its abrupt demise
like chalky outlines at a murder scene.

The one I have is not a favorite, not
the pretty twin, not the one offered
on my side of bed, not the one the
babies sought.

No talk of this
in company, but when I see large,
pendulous casaba fruits, & pink balloons
& word balloons, big tearful raindrops,
fat hanging gourds & busty
gal in the locker room, I remember my breast
and miss it.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

The Hitchhiker

The hitchhiker thirds for shandy
as he chews the roads, thin
endless sticks of greying gum, miles
from the panhandle's anywhere

He thumbs
shadows at gullible windmills in San Ramon
dancing aerobics to the myth of new water
waiting in the earth's oldest holes.

He
watches
the towns' retired poets feasting
slowly
on the words they've lived, scrapes
tar-melt
sandals steamed by street-colored
skies.

He
tamps
strand of meager weeds combed like
hair
grudge-spared by chemotherapy.

We pass
the hitchhiker but we know he is

there.

He lies on civic-minded roadside
tables;

he lies on his bruised beggar's back'

he lies on an atrophied Gladstone'

in the scarred night

he lies to himself.

Cancer Redux

Who invited you back, invader?

Armies of needles evicted
you once; no welcome mats lay clean
now at the ready... why return?
NO tissues want you, no bones
or tendons or clans of muscles
want to enroll as caterers
for your maniacal feast.

Be forewarned: you have no immunity
against salvos of prayers fired
by pilgrims not taking kindly
to your squatting redundant
on an unwilling body,
a resistant, defiant soul.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

The Chemo Issue

I have no hair. Anywhere.
There used to be lots of it.
Here and there. Now I am
contained in skin. Too thin.
Fallout without. No hair.
Anywhere. But it's the fall-in
within I worry about. Is new hair
warming my bones in there?
And is there hirsute tissue?
That's the issue.

Post-Operative

A medical maven subtracts from me:
“You needed these organs no longer’
freed of these misperformers,
your health should be much stronger.”

I’m thus wheeled through labyrinths,
& I recall in my dozen heads,
beyond lies the austere female ward
featuring games of musical beds.

Anesthetic musicales halt
as I peek drowsily at the decor—
Teresa Mulligan’s breathing tube
has fallen to the floor.

She sucks in sounds from her throat;
her last words have disappeared.
She talks with her eyes & seersucker brow,
in dotage she always had feared.

Nurses eat from their parents’ trays,
doctors have stolen my flowers,
“It’s so hard to make ends meet these days:

who wants to work extra hours?"
Truly, they can ignore patient's cries
because, out in the hospital's hall,
smart computers spit who lives, who dies,
charting medical sense of it all.

Teresa's programmed not to survive,
& she must get on with her dying;
A printout says I'm staying alive...
I wonder, why am I crying?

When The Walking Stopped

Her feet died incrementally, toe by toe, began
to sport tubes & drains instead of socks,
moved in bed in mimic of long summer hikes
on tempting trails, after-dinner jaunts
down the block & in town
for therapeutic waffle cones, strolls
to nowhere just for the hell-&-love-of-it.

What good are legs that have deserted you,
& feet that remain useless like loitering
out-of-work in-laws bumming in your kitchen?

Take walks in your head, she said to herself.
Go everywhere you've ever been, & all
the places you never reached. Walk on your
hands, at least the still obedient parts.
Hum hiking tunes, dictate walking rhymes,
& march your anger out the door.

Offended

Two girls sat on the rocks by the lake
today;
their dog ran free (mine was tied.)
Their stay offended me.
Privacy is leaving this planet;
there is no longer room for one
to private in the shade
or solo in the sun.
This crowd's company suffocates;
I move from aisle to aisle,
from place to place.
They find me anywhere;
They want to share
my privacy. How can that be?

Sometimes

Sometimes I tire of the road
That takes me to the same place daily.
But my money always gives out in the night.

Anyway, poets should be thin
because
it is commonly known
that fat people don't suffer enough.

At the moment my crayons are broken,
so the day will be drab...
worse, I always forget
to stay inside the lines.

Mister-on-the-sidewalk,
save the stars for later;
we won't have time to watch them tonight.

Lost

We had to give the baby to the sea:
the lemmings wanted company.
They told us that the earth had died;
after the dark drowning, we learned,
they lied.

Some sturdy infants swam to survive,
to paddle back again;
Some joined the waves of Mother Sea
to evaporate as rain.

Centuries restore sacrificial rites
necessary in a crowded time;
we are powerless to prevent
the dreadful loss of children
before their prime.

None blamed, we are all victims
of The Plan
that failed to quantify the birth of Man.
Weep! Not for self (you are, have been, shall be);
Wail, men, for the lost babies gone asea.

My Friend

Her children are often
late to school;
some days they don't go at all-
she pillow-wrestles them in beds,
makes up impulses for their heads.

She shocks her neighbors
with undraped windows;
her fingernails dirty-soiled
in her garden,
she's waiting patiently
for new clay pots to harden.

She weaves and bakes,
makes mistakes,
failing to acknowledge;
she misses dust and rust and
clutter.

I have overheard her mutter
that she learned more
at college
than she can use in
motherhood.

A new, alluring cause,
perhaps brotherhood,
moves her to books and chats,
the rhythm of a mime;
she then dispatches progeny
to school
to give herself the time
to be a person other
than her children's mother.

Welcome Wagon Exorcism

Never mind the company;
they chose the wrong time
to find you home; their tea
has yet to brew,
so serve yourself in the pantry-
they'll never know the difference.

Seat them on velvet chairs
in the drafty corners,
or on Princess thrones:
raged rattan to chafe and tear-
that way they won't linger...
You'd like to poke a finger
in their neighborly eyes

and charge them with spying.
If they leave footprint scars
in your new shag
what-the-hell,
you'll be dusting later:
fingerprints will tell
you failed the inspection, hag.

Relax: after this
you won't be new anymore...
Besides, the warn on your finger is
missing: Did you put it in their tea?

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Winter's Lament

When Winter bursts
because
he cannot wait
his turn to speak,
and finds that I ignore
his indignant shriek,
he shakes an icy bough,
retaliates
because
he cannot choose
from Summer's warmth
or Spring unseen-
and he must lie,
disconsolate, between.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Night Game At Autzen

(with fireworks)

Fires in
the
night sky

illuminate
gladiators
on the field.

The cold
brighter
rainbows

eradicate
monotonies
of starry
storms.

Forgive the
night
noisemakers:
their riot
reverses

quiet
when night shades
are drawn

and the
pantomime
continues

is given
voice
in

remembered
forms
of galaxies

and
gladiators

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Search Of Angels

Look up her streets
Her bleached fields,
Hunt by the tide
Where sand yields
To eternity.
Run her crowded length,
Seek out her fears, her life,
Her strength.
Where, 'midst her dirt,
Her steel and coal,
Does the searching city
Find her soul?

Too Late Reality's Child

Today I bought a plastic fruit
that squeezed out lemon juice.
I recognized the liquid pale,
the fruit I found obtuse.

Why much such impostors
offer nature's yield?
Shall lemons never be
in my neighbor's field?

Oh, my, shall there be
Plastic people with real emotions?
Shiny, plastic people with real emotions?
Shiny, plastic, continents
containing tideless oceans?

Too late am I reality's child
as my ears ring
with the cold announcements
of plastic everything.

Peaceful Combat

Yours in a stubborn heart, full
of conflicts
that energize in combat
of a peaceful kind.
Willing you to be other
than yourself is not my goal-
but you are
a vested part of my existence,
and it is hard to stay silent
at time when I should.
And, just when
you seem tired of my words,
you put my poems to music
and sing them back to me:
how lovely!

Concert

At the concert today
the horns
fought with the clarinets.
The flutes “refereed”
while the drums agreed
that the horns
had won.
But, for subtle comment,
the triangle
had
the last word.

Geometry
If people were geometric
I'd choose to be
rectangular;
corners for
privacy and love.
But I am
circular,
and I don't know
where I begin
or end.

Paned Lines

Lines on the windows
trace the path of the rain.
My hands blot the droplets
to a prismatic stain
When the rain disappears
into less visible
vapor
I hear a whimper;
I turn to find you crying
to music.
You dance with a shadow-
What dance is this?

Follow the path
of the rain
clap your hands silently
the refrain fall again, again.

Your dance
disappears
to invisible places.
No traces of rain.

Dilution

Dilute my days in rain so soft
that reeds velvetize the grass.
Let prisms blot the droplets
as clouds forget to pass.
Tomorrow I may reach
for something waiting there;
for now
this holy water
soothes. The crying
I can bear,
for I shall find the grace
to move me
from the showers
to that other place.

Dilute my nights
in dark so soft
that shadows puff the evening,
as I am lulled through
into spring's deepening.
I shall ask then
no more dilution
of my hours

if I can have these moments
touched by the showers.

Innocence, June 1975

They wanted you
to role-play
innocence;
why do the pretenders
only believe the act?
rather
than the simplicity
of a straight response,
“I am innocent;
I did not do what
you allege.”
But you seem guilty...
They say, “You
were seen
in the vicinity.”

They mysterious, mythical “they;”
alleging, accusing,
embellishing your truth into lies.
The world, alas.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Plastic Astigmatism

Are the vegetables real?
Don't water those flowers!
Acrylics aren't porous, you know.

Champagne corks
In the parking lot;
I thought they were mushrooms.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Calico Joe

Calico Joe's matching
three-legged kitten
wasn't old enough
to bring the tribute
of a mouse
captured for her master
of the house (whom she loved.)

The accident
made him cry.
He ran over the roley-poley
spirit-fluff
(whom he loved.)

Guam

A magic glad floor in Apra harbor
summoned fish to my feet; a
mutual mask
for myself and the fishes-
glorious colors (such show-offs!)

I saw my reflection,
jealous of fishes who have not heard
that Maine lobstermen never
learn to swim:
(swimmers take longer to drown).
Fish never drown;
they retreat from Apra harbor
into radiance
to watch me back.

Father Never Went to War

My father never went to war,
marched or trooped aboard the trains
or crammed in hammocks out at sea;
too young, too old for either madness,
said he was lucky not to go.
He dug his victory garden finely,
saved the tinfoil from his smokes,
watched Mother knit coarse helmet liners,
shunned Uncle Sam's poster-finger
and warhorse stories at Cutter's Bar,
perched no medals on our mantel
was not asked to join the Legion.
When I was married to a hero,
shrapnel pieces in his arm,
my father never asked him questions,
gave me way not looking up.
Later Father lost a leg to darning,
cried he wished he's lost it fighting.
He deid, nothing folded for his widow,
solent salvos at his grave,
soldier's colors unrepresented.
I put a small flag in beside him
because
my father never went to war.

Seduction

Summer's at me.
I decompose in air so thick
I hear seductive smells,
breathe them through my ears.
Hot roses, sweet hay,
and honeysuckle trickle
to my mouthback like herbal teas,
leak out, fritter down my chin.

The buttercups are fat
with lame notes from lazy bees
begging off work.
There's nothing left to drink
but sweat. My lunchpail cherries
fell to flaps of wanton crows
before the sun attacked.

If I can move by dusk
I'll check the larder
to see what's left of me.

The Trick is Remembering

The trick is remembering... tugging at
the grey quarters, shaping back
to what counted & who
mattered then.

The skill lies in sorting days, culling
the rote, smiling at routines
turned spectacular & memorable.

Friends who hugged us close &
from across the miles, many souls
now fleshed to bones
or ashes on waves or mountaintops
Houses that held all that was loved & dear
& safe & true.

How much can be summoned again... when
we think so hard about
our lives that we ache for recall
but lose details that we thought
would be on tap forever, forged
like clay after firing in a friendly kiln?

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Seaweed and Tea

If I could go barefoot for just one more
 day, I'd steal children & race
for the sea
& dare the sun to freckle me.

Perhaps the two-sounded rain
 would fall on sand towns
we'd build
near a gull-guarded wall.

If I chose to eat sand what harm
 would there be
in rinsing my lips
with a sip from the sea?

I'd wriggle my toes for as long
 as they'd dance,
then leave them for sand dabs
 to find there by chance.

I'd walk home on my hands
&, if the sun melted me,
 I could fit in green gloves
made of seaweed & tea.

Irish for One More Day

(gratefully to the music makers, Brown's Pub, Avoca)

Make me Irish for one more day,
let me hum songs the Irish know'
let me bathe in her torrents of water,
over deep rills as they freely flow.

Give me the diamonds of her nights,
the ruby of a Celtic smile'
let me feel her emerald moods,
the fierce passions of this ancient isle.

Let me belong to Ireland
for just a wee bi more time;
let me look in her children's faces,
and see mine.

Let me find God in her fields
among the ruins and spires'
find me sitting by the peat-fed warmth
of her homely fires.

Then save this day for me,

Patricia Mees Armstrong

for all the days to come'
let me be Irish for one more day,
and tell me that I've come home.

Making Terminal Love

His sentinel chair is not for courting, her bed-for-one,
rampantly levered,
hardly bears the entourage of intravenous
libations of gods-in-charge.
He'd still know her anywhere,
by the curled hands he's held
& petted, by the creases
under ageless eyes that lock with his,
by breaths that persist, challenging
wizened hospice folk who offer them respite
when there is none.

In the dark he talks
to her of the beds they've shared & shook
& stained with love, when she could
not get enough of him, when they shuddered
each first time, then second and third, with
only sleep left to share.

If she is dying, & she is, what harm
if he mounts her almost-bier to lay
on top of her, to will memories
into failing veins & bones, murmuring
old deathless sweetnesss of who they were

together, & are
 as he grabs attentive angels
by their elusive ankles and holds on tight.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Sand Dancing

Take me
sand dancing
to the music
of an orange moon...
make nothing
happen too soon
in this life
we live together.
Touch me
in cotton air,
kiss me everywhere,
and tell me
that we've come home.

When

When your birthdays come,
I give you
myself
in small packages.
I try for an annual blend
of whimsy and substance.
I want your
soul
to feed on these gifts,
your heart to laugh
at each surprise,
and your smile
to warm at the thought
of my
love.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Burnout/Burn-In

These aging selves, candles licking life,
Quickened melts,
Unobtrusive puppet strings turned wicks;
Nourishing flames of friable tapers,
Hold the later life in face.
The little time left worries the light,
Digs the shadows, pummels our sleep,
Feists moon brightness as soon, too soon.
We get from the night what it wants us to have,
Enough to fuel a quick-heated dark,
To kiss our stars burned into dawns.

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Patricia Mees Armstrong

Dear Reader,

Our grandmother was never a good marketer of her own poetry, so her audience was always limited. But having it in our own lives is something we treasure. We hope some of these words have spoken to you in the way they speak to us. She would smile to know that people are still opening books of her verse.

-L & M